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SPECIAL THEME (1):
COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY AS A GENERAL WAY OF
DOING PHILOSOPHY THROUGH CROSS-TRADITION ENGAGEMENT
TOWARD WORLD PHILOSOPHY

PART II: ILLUSTRATING CASES
OF CROSS-TRADITION ENGAGEMENT WORLDWIDE <2>

DOING PHILOSOPHY COMPARATIVELY IN INDIA: CLASSICAL INDIAN AND WESTERN PHILOSOPHICAL TRADITIONS IN ENGAGEMENT

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ABSTRACT: *When Western philosophy was introduced to Indian academia in the late nineteenth century, there arose for Indian philosophers a two-fold need: the need to preserve the self-identity of Indian philosophy and the need to dialogue with Western philosophy. In their attempt to defend the distinctiveness of Indian philosophy, the philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century affirmed that classical Indian philosophy was essentially spiritual. The philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, however, did not have a compulsion to defend Indian philosophy in the face of Western philosophy. Many of them critiqued the traditional view about classical Indian philosophy. For them classical Indian philosophy, too, was a rational discourse and it is equally capable to contribute to the enrichment of philosophy. Today the two traditions—Indian and Western—are known to each other fairly well and hence there is little need to pursue comparative philosophy as a distinct discipline in philosophy. Instead, what should be promoted is an open philosophizing—philosophizing that is characterized by our openness to diverse ways of thought.*

Keywords: *Bhattacharyya, Daya Krishna, open philosophizing, Radhakrishnan, Raju, Matilal, Mohanty*

1. MEETING OF EAST AND WEST: OPENNESS AND RESISTANCE

The study of philosophy as an academic discipline in the modern sense began in India

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when philosophy—both Indian and Western—was introduced in the newly founded modern universities and colleges in the late nineteenth century.[1] When two conceptually strong philosophical traditions—Indian and Western—met with each other in academia, the Indian pundits faced a two-fold challenge, namely how to preserve the self-identity of Indian philosophy and how to dialogue with the new entrant.[2]

Until the arrival of Western philosophy, Indian philosophy was practiced in traditional ways, with occasional debates among different schools within this grand tradition. So there was hardly any need for classical Indian philosophy as a whole to defend itself or to search for its self-identity. But in its face-to-face encounter with Western philosophy—a foreign and imposing alternative way of thinking and practice—suddenly there arose for Indian philosophy the need to find and assert its distinctive self-identity.

In their interpretations of what the real identity of Indian philosophy is, the leading philosophers of the time took a collective position that Indian philosophy is essentially spiritual. They created a binary of comparison: Indian philosophy is spiritual, while Western philosophy is rational; Indian philosophy is practical, while Western philosophy is theoretical. These philosophers were not buying into some Orientalist narrative that the East is mystic and the West is rational, as it is sometimes assumed. Most of them were committed Vedantins and what they did was looking at the whole of Indian philosophy from the point of view of Vedanta and looking at Vedanta itself as the culmination of Indian philosophy.

Even as they defended the distinctive identity of Indian philosophy, not only did most Indian thinkers not shun Western philosophy but also positively engaged Western philosophy in their philosophizing. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, the favored dialogue partners were Vedanta and Western idealism.[3]

To further illustrate the East-West engagement of this period, we take two representative thinkers—K. C. Bhattacharyya (1875-1949) and S. Radhakrishnan (1888-1975). Both these philosophers subscribed to the view that philosophy in India was essentially spiritual. This position was only implicit in Bhattacharyya's philosophy, while Radhakrishnan explicitly, if not apologetically, defended it.[4] According to

[1] Until that time philosophy was practiced in India in the traditional way of master-disciple interaction in small circles of interested persons. Western philosophy made its presence felt in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first three universities—the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras—were founded in 1857.

[2] Judging by their long history, rich literature, and diverse concepts, it is commonly held that Indian, Chinese, and Western philosophies constituted the three major philosophical traditions of the world. But despite China's geographical proximity, Chinese philosophy had little or no presence in India. This is no surprise given the fact that Western philosophy's presence in India was mainly due to the British colonial rule in India.

[3] With the possible exception of Nyaya/Navya-Nyaya, the two dominant philosophical trends in Indian academia were Vedanta—particularly Advaita Vedanta—and German/British Idealism. Vedantic philosophers, in fact, found in Western idealism a right dialogue partner.

[4] For Bhattacharyya's concept of philosophy, see Schreiner 1977. For Radhakrishnan's view, see Schreiner 1977, 239; Kaipayil 1995, 101, n.22.

Bhattacharyya, philosophy is ultimately an introspective (spiritual) activity where the introspecting self (reflective consciousness) reveals itself as pure subjectivity, free of all objectivity and empirical distinctions. For Radhakrishnan, philosophy is intuition into the true nature of reality, which is ultimately spiritual. The true method of philosophy is intuition, which is the hallmark of Indian philosophy. This intuitive method of philosophizing is superior to the rationalism (discursive reasoning) of the West, Radhakrishnan believed.

Now coming to their creative engagement of Western philosophy in their philosophizing, Bhattacharyya employed the Kantian-Hegelian idealism to throw more light on Advaita, whereas Radhakrishnan sought to find idealistic tendencies in the whole of Western philosophy and religion in order to reinforce his idealist view of reality. Bhattacharyya used the notions of Hegelian dialectic and Kantian triple-reason to analyze how human consciousness worked, so he could gain some insight into the dynamics of the supreme consciousness. Radhakrishnan's effort was to remodel the traditional Vedanta into a universal idealistic system that would suit contemporary needs, a view which he described as the "religion of the Spirit."[5]

2. EAST-WEST ENGAGEMENT: CRITICAL THINKING

After the time of Navya-Nyaya, up until the first decades of the twentieth century, the philosophical genius in India was almost dormant.[6] During this period there were hardly any noteworthy philosophical achievements. The reawakening of Indian philosophy happened only with the arrival of Western philosophy.[7] The attempts made by the philosophers of the first half of the twentieth century to re-establish Indian philosophy (in the face of Western philosophy) were part of this reawakening and resurgence. The philosophers of the second half of the twentieth century, however, did not have any such compulsion to defend Indian philosophy and its Indian-ness.[8] So they were intellectually more free to explore philosophy, Indian or Western, in whichever way they preferred. Some of these thinkers took a critical approach to the study of classical Indian philosophy, and they critiqued many traditional assumptions and interpretations regarding Indian philosophy. We choose for discussion three representative thinkers of this "critical" phase of East-West meeting: B. K. Matilal (1935-91), J. N. Mohanty (b. 1928), and Daya Krishna (1924-2007).

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[5] For more on the philosophy of Bhattacharyya and Radhakrishnan, see Kaipayil (2020, 295-97).

[6] The last of the classical systems to flourish in India was Navya-Nyaya (from the 13th to 17th century), whose principal representatives were Gangesha (fl. 1320) and Raghunatha (fl. 1510). Raghunatha may be taken as the last of the great philosophers of the classical period. The contributions of the Navya-Nyaya commentators like Jagadisha (fl.1630), Mathuranatha (fl.1650), and Gadadhara (fl.1660) are not discounted, though.

[7] The Indian renaissance led by the social reformer and educationist Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) also contributed to this reawakening.

[8] With regard to their reading of classical Indian philosophy, the former group of thinkers may be called the "first-generation" contemporary Indian philosophers and this latter group, the "second-generation" contemporary Indian philosophers.

The traditionalists would always say philosophy and religion are inseparable in the Indian tradition. But Indian philosophy cannot claim its legitimacy as a philosophy, unless its philosophical contents stood out as more important than its religious origins and the religious loyalties of its past masters.[9] Indian philosophy should be presented as philosophy and not as some spiritual or religious thought. Matilal, Mohanty, and Daya Krishna took some bold steps in this direction and potential new ways of doing Indian philosophy. They critically examined the conventional view that the nature of Indian philosophy was primarily religious. According to them, philosophy is just philosophy, no matter whether it is Indian or Western.

Matilal and Mohanty may be discussed together, because of their shared interest in Navya-Nyaya and similar style of philosophizing.[10] Matilal was trained in Anglo-American analytic philosophy and Mohanty in Husserlian phenomenology. Trained in both Indian and Western traditions, they became disenchanted with the way Indian philosophy was conventionally presented. Navya-Nyaya convinced Matilal and Mohanty that Indian thinking was rigorously theoretical and relentlessly intellectual.

Regarding their view of comparative philosophy, both Matilal and Mohanty doubted the philosophical value of doing comparative philosophy, if it is showing mere similarities and differences. For Matilal, the goal of comparative philosophy should at least be interpreting and explaining one tradition in the terms and concepts of the other. And for Mohanty, comparative philosophy should be a discourse in which different traditions participated and different cross-cultural perspectives contributed to the enrichment of philosophy. Such a conversation is possible because the universality of rational thinking transcends differences, even as it exists and operates in and through these differences.

Now coming to Daya Krishna, he was a radical thinker with counter perspectives on many received views about Indian and comparative philosophy.[11] Indian philosophical tradition is "philosophical" in the same sense as the Western philosophical tradition is supposed to be, argued Daya Krishna. One of the reasons why Indian philosophy has been misconstrued as being predominantly spiritual is because it presents *moksha* (liberation) as the greatest good of life—the highest goal to be achieved. According to Daya Krishna, the ideal of *moksha*—originated in the Shramanic tradition and later incorporated into and adapted by the Vedic tradition as well—was not something unique to philosophy alone. It had permeated the whole of Indian culture—India's religion, literature, and art. Therefore, philosophy's commitment to *moksha* was only a matter of convention and concession to popular belief. Indian philosophy, like any other philosophy, is primarily a conceptual

[9] The words of Max Müller, who believed that classical Indian philosophers deserved a place by the side of the leading philosophers of Europe, are pertinent here: "In some cases the enthusiasm of native students may seem to have carried them too far, and a mixing up of philosophical with religious and theosophic propaganda, inevitable as it is said to be in India, is always dangerous" (Müller 1899, xx).

[10] For Matilal's and Mohanty's views on Indian and comparative philosophy, see Mohanty 1992, 397-406.

[11] For Daya Krishna's views on Indian and comparative philosophy, see Daya Krishna 1991, ch. 1-3; Daya Krishna 1989, 71-83.

enterprise concerned with issues relating to our understanding of reality and *moksha* is tangential to it.

The way Daya Krishna sees it, different philosophies provide alternative conceptual schemes to organize our experience and live its meaning and significance. Doing philosophy comparatively would then be not a search for similarities but differences.

3. COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY: INDIAN CONTRIBUTION

In the first half of the twentieth century, attempts were made by promoters of East-West studies in philosophy to fashion a systematic discipline, generally known as "comparative philosophy," arguably in imitation of a similar endeavor in the study of religions called "comparative religion." The Indian contributions to the emergence of this new discipline are noteworthy.[12]

Among the leading comparativists of the last century, the name of P.T. Raju (1904-92) stands out as one who relentlessly worked to establish comparative philosophy as a discipline with an identity and a methodology of its own. A close follower of S. Radhakrishnan in his style of writing and philosophizing, Raju shared with Radhakrishnan the conviction that Indian philosophy was essentially spiritual. With Radhakrishnan he also held that comparative philosophy as a cross-traditional discipline should engage all important philosophical traditions of the world, more particularly Indian, Chinese, and Western.

Raju conceived of all philosophies as philosophies of life. The relative strength of a philosophical tradition depended on its ability to provide an integral view of human life, accounting for both human inwardness and outwardness. Keeping this in mind, Raju proposed a three-step method for comparative philosophy, involving (1) study of major philosophical traditions, (2) comparison of main conceptual schemes found in these traditions, to evaluate their relative strengths and weaknesses in providing for an integral view of life, and (3) philosophical synthesis, in view of an integral outlook on human life.[13]

According to Raju, no tradition is perfect and is capable of providing a holistic view of human life. Indian tradition, for example, is stronger in its emphasis on human inwardness but weaker on human outwardness. Different philosophical traditions are complementary to each other, and hence a philosophical synthesis, taking in the positive elements from different traditions, is indispensable. Raju initially believed that the ultimate goal of comparative philosophy is formation of a world philosophy, a grand philosophical synthesis—a single unified philosophical system to which all major traditions contributed and to which all can subscribe. But eventually he settled for a more realistic goal of having multiple forms of philosophical synthesis, each tradition or even each philosopher having their own synthesis.

[12] See Kaipayil 1995, 1, 6-12.
[13] For a detailed discussion of Raju's method, see Kaipayil 1995, 52-66.

4. COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY: A CRITIQUE

I would like to end this brief overview of the Indian story of East-West engagement in philosophy with a critical note on the continued relevance of comparative philosophy as a distinct discipline in India. Comparative philosophy, understood in the Indian context as dialogue between Indian and Western philosophies, has been in existence for about a century now. It arose out of the need of the earlier philosophers to better understand Indian and Western philosophies by interpreting one in light of the other. And comparative philosophy has served this purpose well.

Over the past half century, Indian and Western philosophies have learnt to treat each other as equal partners in any philosophical discourse. This is mainly due to equal importance given to their study in the philosophy curriculum of universities and colleges. Students are exposed to a wide range of philosophers and philosophical problems through the study of history of philosophy, both Indian and Western. How far students do integrate the insights they gain from these studies into their own philosophizing is a different question, though.

Comparative philosophy, pursued as a distinct discipline with a methodology of its own, is of little consequence to critical creative philosophizing. Comparative philosophy is basically an exercise in history of philosophy. Further, comparative philosophy is about cross-traditional, cross-cultural scholarship and expertise in philosophical studies and only secondarily about philosophizing as such. This does not mean that comparative philosophy is philosophically not worth doing. Instead, it only means that the philosophical worth of any comparative endeavor should be judged by its ability to promote "open philosophizing," which in turn can contribute to philosophy's progress.

Open philosophizing is one characterized by an individual philosopher's intellectual openness to diverse ways of thought.[14] Indeed, philosophy as our continuous conceptual search to make a rational sense of reality (the world around us) and our place in it is an open-ended project. It is to this open-ended project that open philosophizing contributes. There is no philosophical imperative, however, for an individual philosopher to engage with another philosophy in their philosophizing. Nor can we assume that a comparatively informed philosophy is a better philosophy than a philosophy solely informed by one's home tradition (cf. Neville 2022, 26). But it is recommended to engage with other philosophies, because the study of another philosophy can possibly form a point of departure for and a stimulus to one's philosophical reflection (cf. Copleston 1982, 16).[15] To put it in the Indian way, another's view can become the *purva-paksha* (prior position) to establish one's own *uttara-paksha* (subsequent position). It is in regard to this *purva-paksha* and *uttara-*

[14] See Kaipayil 1995, 120-21,130.

[15] What Daya Krishna said in a different but related context is also relevant here. Our encounter with world history of philosophy and east-west engagement in philosophy is not a movement into the past but rather a movement into the future, a stepping into the "living currents that flow from the past and have sufficient vitality and force in the present to carry one onwards into the future" (Daya Krishna 2002, 343).

paksha dynamics of philosophizing that the study of world history of philosophy and east-west comparative studies in philosophy have their significance.

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